

Indigenous companion planting in the great churn: Three sisters in Kalapuya ilihi

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ene**Brian Klopotek**

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Abstract

This article addresses place, culture, community, and mobility in relation to Indigenous food sovereignty and TEK (traditional ecological knowledge). We start with a reflection on what it means to live in the Pacific Northwest of the United States for people from tribes that use Three Sisters agriculture. Two of the authors grew corn, beans, and squash using wintertime, indoor hydroponics and other methods in a performance art mode in Kalapuya ilihi (Western Oregon, USA). Growing these sacred companion plants out of soil, out of sun, out of season, and out of place served as a meditation on our own senses of dislocation and disjuncture as well as modes of connection as Southeastern Natives living in the Pacific Northwest. The politics and practice of growing and/or tending traditional Indigenous food plants in both traditional and non-traditional ways and places provided new language for understanding Indigenous cultural and social health in relation to Indigenous traditions, mobility, and relationality. The three authors (two from Southeastern tribes, one from a Northwestern tribe) provide a model for collaborative intercultural Indigenous ecological projects as a mode of learning, a mode of relational Indigenous mobility, a mode of community-building, and a mode of engaging in Indigenous food sovereignty. Working on community and educational projects together helped us understand companion planting as an analogy, an aesthetic, a method, and a mode for building relational futures.

Keywords

Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous politics, relationality, environmental humanities, mobility

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Corn, beans, and squash, the exalted Three Sisters of Native American agriculture, have provided sustenance for billions of people over several millennia. Corn was so integral historically that the annual cycle of its growth established the ceremonial calendar for many of the peoples who relied on it, a set of traditions that continues into the present. Not surprisingly, many people from Corn tribes have been working to revitalize Three Sisters agriculture in an effort to grow healthy, culturally relevant food and break from the cycle of reliance on unhealthy, overly processed foods and foodways imposed by colonial economies—in other words, to pursue Indigenous food sovereignty. As a decentered global project, the food sovereignty movement asserts the rights of peoples to healthy and culturally sustaining foods and to control over their own food systems in a liberal global economy that seeks to undermine local sovereignty. Specifically Indigenous food sovereignty, as Coté (2016) describes it, “moves beyond a rights-based discourse by emphasizing the cultural responsibilities and relationships Indigenous peoples have with their environment and the efforts being made by Indigenous communities to restore these relationships through the revitalization of Indigenous foods and ecological knowledge systems as they assert control over their own foods and practices.” But how can the millions of Indigenous individuals living outside their Indigenous homelands—by force or by choice or somewhere in between—participate in Indigenous food sovereignty? What does it mean to grow corn in a place where it wasn’t grown before? In attending to Indigenous mobility practices and values (Standfield, 2018), what might relational Indigenous mobility look like where Indigenous food sovereignty is concerned?

This article describes a performance art intervention project designed to help us sort through what Indigenous food sovereignty would mean for each of us, living in the same place but coming from different tribes. Two of us, Talon Claybrook and Brian Klopotek, come from Corn peoples but ended up outside our homelands in the great churn of contemporary Indigenous life. Our dislocation made us want to grow corn to feel connected with our distant homelands and relatives, but we were living in Kalapuya ilih, the homelands of the Kalapuyan peoples of the Willamette Valley of Oregon, nearby to the homeland of our third author, Joe Scott. The original peoples here did not adopt corn agriculture, instead relying on ecosystem management in varying intensities to produce bountiful harvests of camas, berries, acorns, and many other edible plants, in addition to their beloved salmon and other creatures of land and sea. So how would Talon and Brian engage in Indigenous food sovereignty while living in Kalapuya ilih? This was the question we set out to answer. Engaging in Indigenous food sovereignty projects together came with a set of lessons for all of us not only about food, but also about place, Indigenous mobility, and relational community building. We came to understand companion planting as an analogy, an aesthetic, and a mode for the kind of relational world we want to live in.

The art project

The Three Sisters Project started as performance art for Talon, as a meditation on what it meant to him to be Mvskoke and attending art school at a predominantly White institution in Oregon. He grew up in the Keystone Lake area of rural Oklahoma, son of an ecovlke (deer clan) mother, and therefore ecovlke himself, tied to the Tuckabutche and Tallahassee tribal towns. When the United States forcefully removed Mvskokes from Georgia, Alabama, and Florida in the 1830s, those who survived carried the sacred fires of their tribal towns to this new place and used them to rekindle their ways of being. In thinking about himself as a Mvskoke in a new place away from his people, he wondered what elements of his culture he could carry with him and which elements were the most important to maintain. He reflected on his participation at the Stomp Ground and in the Green Corn Ceremony as vital elements of an intergenerational sense of Mvskoke identity. The cycle of corn growth drives the annual ceremonial cycle for Mvskokes, with the Green Corn Ceremony as the central element. In an overly simplified narrative of that ceremony,

Mvskoke people fast, dance, sing, take medicine, laugh, share stories, and deprive themselves of rest to reaffirm relations to one another in the community and to humbly recognize their flaws as living beings. The first harvestable corn, beans, squash, and other foods are offered to the Breathmaker in gratitude and in supplication for another year of sustenance. Talon could see some elements of those traditions that had clearly changed since earlier generations, as all cultural traditions do. He wondered how those decisions about change were made and whose interests they served. What is the essence of the relationship of Mvskoke people to corn, beans, and squash, he wondered, without which Mvskoke culture could not survive? What is the essence that would help him feel connected to people at home and to his ancestors, even while living elsewhere? What was the active ingredient in this medicine? What sort of performative act or intervention could reveal this essence?

As Talon explored this relationship through performance and intervention art framing, he decided to grow corn, beans, and squash out of soil, out of season, out of sun, and out of place as an artistic and metaphorical expression of his own sense of dislocation and disjuncture. That is to say, he would grow the Three Sisters hydroponically in his art studio with grow-lights and buckets full of expanded clay pellets and water and see what came of it. As an intervention artist, Talon often juxtaposes unlikely paired ideas or contradictory images to produce a new clarity in the viewer through disjuncture, examining utopian/dystopian elements of technology in relation to Indigenous futurity, White supremacy, and settler colonialism. What would it reveal to take the patient process of growing the Three Sisters out of its usual earthly circumstances and turn it into something more mechanical in an environmentally destitute future? Is this how Mvskokes would retain the essence of their identities in an environmental apocalypse? Would it be any better or worse than eating canned corn from Walmart in the present? Without knowing what would emerge on the other side of the process, he started work to see what the Three Sisters Project would reveal.

The central place of corn in Mvskoke life was not something Talon needed to learn about from a book, but he found value in the technical understanding academic researchers have provided about symbiotic nature of the plants. For those not familiar, the Three Sisters method of growing corn, beans, and squash together is a widespread Indigenous technology of Abiyala (Keme and Coon, 2018) with multiple benefits in terms of yield, plant health, and human nutrition (Mt. Pleasant 2006; Cajete 1999; Mihesuah and Hoover, 2019). While there is some variation in how people do it, the idea of this kind of companion planting, as it is called, is that each of the three plants benefits from growing with the other. Plant corn in the middle with its tall, strong stalks. Plant beans around them several weeks later so they can wrap vines around the stalks to climb higher while transporting nitrogen from the air into vital nutritional nodules in the soil (Wilker, et al., 2019). The squash spreads its wide, bristly leaves out around them low to the ground, pulling down competing plants by wrapping tendrils around them. Alone, corn has an amazing amount of carbohydrates, but little accessible protein. When nixtamalized (cooked with lime or ash) and eaten with beans, its amino acids pair with complementary amino acids in the beans to form a complete protein. Squash provides seeds loaded with healthy fats and minerals, in addition to the carbohydrates, vitamins, and protein in its flesh. Corn, beans, and squash fed millions of people for untold generations before the Columbian invasion, and contemporary agricultural scientists have supported this traditional agricultural knowledge with useful insights into the underlying biochemistry that has made them so successful together as companion plants. (Staller et al., 2006).

When Talon started talking through the project with him, Brian originally just volunteered to host an aquaponics setup at his house. Aquaponics is an expanded version of hydroponics; the idea is to keep about 50 edible fish that can tolerate small spaces—something like tilapia—and nourish crops with the waste they create. That way a household can have both fish and vegetables to eat with lower environmental, social, and monetary cost than shopping at a grocery store.

Talon was a graduate student at the time, living in an apartment where a large aquaponics operation wouldn't be feasible. The typical tank for a household level aquaponics operation is 275 gallons, something landlords would surely frown upon. Brian's laundry room, though unheated, seemed like a good spot since it has a big south-facing window, a floor drain, and a cement floor. Brian has been teaching a Native environmentalism class since serving as a teaching assistant for Winona LaDuke in 1998, and he's Choctaw himself—close relatives of Mvskoke— so he gladly joined the project from that point forward.

As a starting point for talking through what it would look like, we decided to have a planning breakfast at Brian's house in December of 2018. Brian made a meal that consisted of the Three Sisters: corn in the form of grits, pinto beans, and butternut squash soup. For local accompaniment to our foods from the Southeast, he also cooked salmon, a "first food" for many Northwest Native people that occupies a similar space in their food world as corn does for us. The idea was to use the food to get us thinking about our project and what it might reveal to us. The meal was part of the project, part of the ceremony (Wilson, 2008).

As Brian cooked, he was uncomfortably conscious of the origin of each food item. Factory farms produced the hominy for the Quaker grits, boxed and shipped from who-knows-where, probably including GMO corn. The pinto beans came from a five-pound plastic store-brand bag. The squash soup was made with an organic butternut squash, at least, but was chicken bouillon, a splash of cream, and a dash of curry powder to enhance the flavor and texture okay for our project? Or should we try to keep it pure? Is "purity" attainable or even desirable? Were we being lazy about it? Or adaptive?

The salmon, Brian bought frozen from the big chain grocery store down the street. The package said it was "wild caught Alaskan sockeye salmon." Living in the US Northwest, we know "wild caught" means there's a good chance it was released from a fish hatchery, perhaps even a tribal hatchery. This stop-gap measure eases pressure on the overall salmon population until the dozens of dams blocking access to salmon breeding grounds are removed. But our salmon was not bought directly from a tribal fisherman, not caught in a local river, and we didn't read the label to see if it was "sustainably caught," so of course we don't know what kind of fishing operations we are supporting. And it was frozen, another significant consumer of energy. But this is the system that produces industrialized food, and making that visible is part of our project. The one small consolation we felt came from Nimipu marine biologist Zach Penney, lead biologist for the Columbia River Intertribal Fish Commission. He let us know that a large number of salmon caught in the Gulf of Alaska originated in the Columbia River, so it may have been "local" in some sense, at least.

Talon and Brian ate the meal together with Brian's teen-aged sons, Gabe and Isaiah. We talked about where all our food came from and what it might mean to grow our own food in unconventional ways in a place where corn, beans, and squash are not traditional foods. The Three Sisters Project, which is to say, Talon's art project, had already started its work. Through planning this "performance" of post-apocalyptic traditional food growth, we became more conscientious about our food, we built community with each other around our un/traditional foods, we shared knowledge with the next generation, we moved toward Indigenous revitalization, we became more conscientious about what it meant to be in that place, and we began planning for new practices.

We asked questions together about what it meant to be doing this project here. Because we are not Native to Kalapuya ilihī, would we be settlers? Or would it be better to use the term arrivants (Byrd, 2011) to recognize the ways economic and political systems posted us here, like members of the military, at an academic station? Fort Eugene? How does Indigeneity travel with us? How would we connect with exciting conversations about Indigenous mobility as an act of sovereignty, or as resistance to Indigenous containment (Whyte, Talley, and Gibson, 2019)? How could we be here in relationship with Indigenous peoples of this place in a way that supported rather than

undermined their territoriality? For us, those practices of relationship with the Indigenous peoples of this place, in support of their territoriality, might keep our Indigenous souls intact, too.

As the discussion went forward, Talon recalibrated his ambition, making his project fit into his art studio on campus instead of Brian's house, and Brian started complementary projects at his house. We considered the environmental and cultural impact of every decision we made along the way. In both of our experiments, Talon and Brian tried multiple modes of growing the Three Sisters: container gardening in pots of dirt, hydroponics and aquaponics in water and hydroton, and indoor starts with transplantation to outdoor locations when the weather warmed enough. We both had memories of growing up gardening elsewhere and through other means, but these versions were new to us.

A lot of the problems in this process, we could see coming. Growing crops out of season means grow-lights, and grow-lights require electricity. In the US Northwest, that means electricity generated mostly by dams—the very same dams that have devastated populations of salmon, c'waam, eels, and sturgeon throughout the region. Every watt of energy from those dams comes at the expense of the fish and, by extension, all the humans and non-humans who rely on them, thereby undermining Indigenous food sovereignty in our region.

Similarly, the most common growing medium for hydroponic production is hydroton, expanded clay pellets that have to be kiln-fired and tumbled for as long as 12 hours. Most industrial kilns are fired by natural gas. The greenhouse gases put off by that much firing are significant. And then there's the fish tank, with its electrical consumption and even the energy that goes into its initial production. The usual tank for aquaponics productions is a 275-gallon industrial plastic tote in a metal cage. How much plastic would a fish absorb from living in a plastic fish tank and how much would be passed on to the plants? Brian used a glass tank to avoid this issue and bought only used equipment to keep from producing another tank. We wondered whether this slightly less toxic glass fish tank could be scaled up for a larger project, and what the environmental costs might be.

Talon started growing corn, beans, and squash with some heritage seeds he located online. He set them up in the window of his art studio on campus, with the pink glow of the grow lights warming the street below in the early December evenings. From the time they started sprouting, he began to feel accompanied in the racialized space of the art studio. As they grew, the Three Sisters began to soothe away the feelings of isolation that characterized so much of his art school life. The mood-boosting effect of indoor plants is well known, but the cultural attachment to these plants and the project elevated the impact. They helped create a sense of community, identity, and cultural connection in a space that previously seemed to eradicate those elements.

Despite our best efforts and attention, the harvest of food was minimal. We certainly made mistakes along the way, and we learned that some plants simply aren't suited to certain modes. But success of the art project didn't require the production of food, only the production of lessons, and the harvest in that sense was bountiful.

The homestead narrative and the colonization of Native agriculture

In our efforts to educate ourselves, we sought to connect with local gardeners to get advice on growing these crops in Kalapuya ilih. Brian and Talon have no family roots here to call on, no elders who have been farming here for decades (much less, millennia), no traditional ecological knowledge of this place. We saw an advertisement for a local "home and garden show," which turned out to be a convention hall full of people hawking goods and services related to gardening, sprinkled in with some related classes. None of the classes looked particularly promising for Indigenous farming methods, but we decided to simply attend whatever was offered anyway.

The first seminar we went to was taught by an older White woman with a PhD in biology from Harvard. She is a talented horticulturalist and works to promote organic and sustainable gardening and open-source (non-patent-protected) seeds. In the back of the room, she sold seeds and copies of her books. She is a far better gardener than most of us will ever be in terms of the amount and quality of food she can produce. In many ways, we admire the work that she does and the life she leads, eating the food she grows and teaching others how to do the same.

In other ways, she reproduces settler logics jarringly. For example, she has developed her own strain of squash based on something called “sweet meat squash.” She says this is a “traditional Oregon variety,” by which she means traditional Anglo; all squash is indigenous to Abiyala, but “sweet meat squash” is a variety introduced by a Portland seed company in 1947 (Victory Seeds, nd). Native people didn’t grow squash in Kalapuya ilihī before the 1800s. The variety she developed, she named “Oregon Homestead Sweetmeat Squash.” The valorization of the Anglo pioneer narrative is insidious in the Pacific Northwest, so it’s hardly surprising to see “homesteading” romanticized without any recognition of its critical role in the dispossession and genocide of Native peoples, especially in Kalapuya ilihī. The garden show presenter isn’t unique in this regard, so we don’t mean to single her out; settler colonial ideology shapes people to think in particular ways. In contemporary settler minds, “homestead” signifies a simple and self-sustaining way of life that might even be in line with some Indigenous ecological practices. But that settler move to innocence is why it’s so insidious (Tuck and Yang, 2012). It is both a product of Indigenous erasure and a producer of Indigenous erasure. That is to say, the homestead was the very mechanism White settlers used to occupy and possess Kalapuya land, notably through the Oregon Donation Land Claim Act of 1850 that “granted” tribal land to White settlers even before the land was officially ceded by Kalapuyan peoples and other area tribes through treaties between 1851 and 1855. To make explicit the White supremacist intent, the act even went so far as to exclude Black settlers from participation (Coleman, 2019). Homesteading was virulently racist and inextricably connected with genocidal process of removing and/or killing Kalapuya people (Ostler, 2019; Whaley, 2010). To romanticize homesteading requires erasing that entire history and mystifying the process of ethnic cleansing it was intended to accomplish.

The celebratory settler narrative is not isolated to the Pacific Northwest, of course (O’Brien, 2010; Blee and O’Brien, 2019). While trying to add the Three Sisters more regularly into his diet, Brian started looking for good corn meal to make cornbread or spoonbread, both of which were staples in his mom’s childhood, made from scratch. Of course, it’s best to grind your own corn, which makes mouthwatering cornbread when fresh, but he was not at that point yet. He saw the packaged corn bread mixes on the shelf, and one looked like it might be the kind of artisanal quality he was looking for. With a brown paperboard box featuring a snarling bear and “Kodiak Cakes” written across it in an old-timey font, it even crossed his mind that they might have some Indigenous link. But no, of course not. Further down on the front of the box, there it was: “homestead style.” On the back of the box, the narrative gets even more explicitly settler-colonial:

FRONTIER FOOD RESTORED

In the early days, lumberjacks and pioneers relied on food packed with protein and essential nutrients from whole grains to get them through long days on the frontier. Though most of us have traded in our axes for laptops, we still crave nourishing food.

Kodiak Cakes cornbread is meant for those of us who, like the rugged pioneers exploring the untamed wilderness, require nutrition, energy, and great taste to successfully navigate today’s frontier...

Nourishment for today's frontier.

These are the subtle ways the valorized settler-colonial narrative and its attendant White masculine nationalism infiltrate the air that we breathe. We consume White innocence and Indigenous genocide and dispossession passively as we walk down the aisles of the grocery store.

Perhaps feeling self-conscious with two Native men sticking out in the small, otherwise White audience, the garden show instructor praised an as-told-to Hidatsa source (Wilson, 1987, 1917) in her talk about squash, despite the colonizing name of her own squash. Still, we are troubled by the way she talks about her own work “developing a variety” in comparison with the Indigenous agriculturalists who developed squash into a ubiquitous domesticated food plant in the Americas. Indian crops, she said, “don’t have pure strains.” This strikes us as ironic since she is selling seeds for “Dakota Tears onions” and “Cherokee tomatoes” in the back of the room, and Native farmers of Abiyala developed 60% of the world’s domesticated crop plants, including corn, beans, and squash (Weatherford, 1988). Her approach is “scientific” and intentional, while Indigenous practices are contrasted as almost accidental, a result of “natural” processes with no human intelligence applied, never mind that corn wouldn’t even exist without Indigenous agriculturalists.

Beyond reserving observational science and ingenuity exclusively to Whites, the exaltation of purity and breeding matches settler logics of race in troubling ways that run through the academic agricultural and biological sciences historically (Umeek/Atleo, 2012). Witness the attempts to copyright the wild rice genome or the various copyrighted strains of corn and other “terminator” seeds developed by capitalist agricultural giants such as Monsanto (LaDuke, 2005). Witness the ecological sterility of monocropping corn on corporate farms with emphasis on the exclusion of plant and animal diversity in bare dirt fields where only the cash crop is allowed to exist. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, 138-9) powerfully describes the many rounds of application of herbicides, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers that stand in for the work that beans and squash normally do, creating mile after mile of sterile, lonely, genetically modified corn clones deployed in service to settler capitalism, with no other life allowed in those fields. Corn has been colonized into oblivion and turned into a tool of colonialism in the form of high fructose corn syrup, bio-ethanol, clear-cut rainforests, and industrial feed lots for cattle. Such non-relational, extractive practices take what was healthy and return it upon us as a driver of diabetes, of global warming, of mass extinctions, and of animal cruelty. What new relationships might we form with corn through this project? Can we rescue corn from its colonial yoke?

In further contrast to the Good Earth Eugene Home and Garden Show, which was primarily a marketing venture, when we went to a powwow at Lane Community College the next month, a group of women was handing out free seeds and instructions for planting Three Sisters gardens. They printed out small informational sheets and talked about the Three Sisters in Haudenasonee tradition, using the Seneca word De-o-ha-ko, “Our Sustainers,” to describe them. Similarly, when the three of us attended “The Living Breath of wətəb?altxː: Indigenous Foods and Ecological Knowledge” conference hosted by Indigenous faculty and community at University of Washington, the spirit of sharing and engagement was constant. The love for tradition and innovation alike, always connected to Indigenous cultures and experiences, fed our souls. “Companion planting” is a way of life, a central aesthetic component of Indigenous food sovereignty, not just for the plants. The difference between the Eugene garden show and the two Indigenous venues captures some of the spirit of this project. The good feeling of interacting with the women at the powwow and the Living Breath conference contrasted with the frustration and disappointment of the settler-colonial undertones that permeated the Home and Garden Show, which was more like a showcase of unattainable dreams at unaffordable prices in an unsustainable culture.

Learning place, place-based learning, and traditional ecological inquiry in Kalapuya ilihi

As Talon and Brian undertook the Three Sisters Project, they reached out to build connections with people working on related local Indigenous ecology and food sovereignty projects. They had an idea that they might be able to help grow camas starts or other native plant starts in aquaponics beds to help restore local populations, to understand camas better, to involve other students at the University of Oregon, and to support Kalapuya ecology in Kalapuya ilihi. In that process, Talon and Brian connected with Joe, a Siletz tribal member of Takelma descent working with the local watershed council on Indigenous traditional ecological inquiry projects for Native youth.¹

Joe's ongoing project with the Long Tom Watershed Council has been to invite Native youth and families to come to a parcel of conservation trust land just south of Eugene to explore one of the few remaining plots of oak savanna in the area, conduct hands-on work to restore it, and experiment with plants to better understand the ecosystem. In the generations before settlers arrived, Kalapuya people maintained the oak savanna in the Willamette River Valley in a way that produced in abundance the plants and animals they wanted most. Their seasonal round for food relied heavily on camas and acorn production, supplemented by harvests of other roots, berries, elk, deer, and other game, and various fish and shellfish (Lewis, nd). Similarly, they relied on the land to produce plants such as bear grass for basket production, cedar for plank houses and clothing, and hazel for baskets, arrows, nuts, and other needs.

Brian invited Joe to give guest lectures about his work in a couple of classes and asked him to host a field trip with students so we could see what he was up to and build new connections. Our goal was not just to inform, but to support the work of restoring Indigenous ecological knowledge and Kalapuya ecology itself. Connecting university and Indigenous community projects moves beyond territorial acknowledgments and towards restoring useable territory to tribes, even in places where outright ownership isn't restored (Middleton Manning, 2011; Wolf, 2004). We work together to restore relationships of Indigenous peoples to their land.

While Talon and Brian both recognized that Kalapuya ilihi was not our homeland, the term "Native American" has the ironically colonizing effect of encouraging us to feel like we were Indigenous in some sense everywhere in the United States. Trying and largely failing to grow corn, beans, and squash in Kalapuya ilihi illustrated the point that we were not Indigenous to this place. Our ancestral knowledge of how to grow these crops came from the other side of the continent. Of course, others with a lot more experience than us have successfully grown corn, beans, and squash in Kalapuya ilihi, but growing the plants in the performance art context that we did helped us contemplate in more visceral ways how distant we were from the red earth, hot sun, and summer downpours of eastern Oklahoma and western Louisiana. The Three Sisters Project provided all three of us with a more nuanced understanding of our relationship to Kalapuya ilihi and place in general.

Academic conversations around Indigenous conceptions of place are extensive and multifaceted. As homeland, as territory of jurisdiction and responsibility, as sacred geography, as ancestral, as producer of the specificities of tribal life, as all that sustains us and the other-than-humans, as economic base, as bearer of tribal culture, as witness to tribal history, as tender mother, as educator, as stolen patrimony, as object of grief—all of these and more shape the way we talk about place in Indigenous studies (Basso, 1996; Tuck and McKenzie, 2015; Coulthard and Simpson, 2016). In this case, what performance art produced was a renewed emphasis on the "areas of increased diplomacy, ceremony, and sharing" that Leanne Simpson suggests characterize Indigenous approaches to other people's territory, literally and metaphorically (Simpson et al., 2015). It is, of course, an oversimplification to suggest that all Indigenous cultures historically emphasized these approaches, but if Indigenous as a category is about a shared experience of

disempowerment in your homelands at the hands of an invading force, then it makes sense that groups who share these experiences would develop similar protocols of acknowledgment of other peoples' territorial rights and work to support them. Indigenous solidarity and relationality shape Indigenous mobility, and relationality means not just caring about the wellness of your own people, but about how your own practices affect the health of Indigenous communities around the world in relation to their places. It's not that leaving your homeland is unacceptable (indeed, mobility can be evidence of sovereignty and freedom), but that when we do, we have an obligation to honor and uphold the relationship to the land of the people whose territory we are visiting. As Lani Teves (2018) suggests for Hawaii, when the generous spirit of "aloha" is shorn of its original reciprocal obligations, it facilitates extractivism. Absent those elements of Indigenous reciprocity, "visiting" easily becomes "invasion."

Especially when living in a place over a long term, all of us need to attend to those relationships beyond verbal territorial acknowledgments, and the first steps might be a walk on the land beneath our feet with Indigenous partners. Academics and educators have resources available to make it happen, but certain academic fields have a tendency to get locked into the classroom. When we go to places to learn about history, culture, politics, and natural elements of those places, then place-based education dramatically increases our depth of understanding. It's harder to feel the power of place in the classroom. We know this intuitively about study-abroad programs, but the same is true for Indigenous studies. We encourage faculty, students, and community members alike to arrange local field trips on any scale, especially those who haven't done so previously, and just see what happens. Letting go of rigid control opens opportunities for new kinds of learning and experiences for all of us—students, community members, and faculty alike—and reflects a less hierarchical engagement, creating the world we hope to model. If the university is the "master's house," to reference Audre Lorde's (2007) famous and fundamentally relational challenge to the academy, fearless transformation involves surrender of the master's authority that universities and even classrooms themselves push us to embody and simultaneous engagement and community-building with people and land.

In this spirit, we conducted a voluntary field trip for Brian's Native environmentalism class, for a first-year Native studies cohort, and for members of the Native American Student Union (NASU). We traveled to the ecological trust land ten miles south of town on a cold, blustery, rainy February day, but the students were in good spirits. The university group joined other community members who regularly participated in Joe's Saturday TEIP classes. Joe led us on a hike and told us about how to spot poison oak and why to remove Scotch broom, about the spacing of oaks and the need for fire on the land, about his programmatic goals and his own limitations, about madrone trees and oaks growing together, about bear grass and hazel in baskets, about eating Oregon grapes and cat's ears (a plant, not the actual ears of a cat), about the different kinds of ferns and their traditional uses, about how to distinguish wild native roses from European roses (the thorns are straight on indigenous roses), and mostly about how this special little plot of oak savanna reflected ancestral Indigenous landscape management that had fallen into disrepair.

Talon and Brian could not have understood Kalapuya ecology without this work with Joe. We started thinking differently about how to be good guests in Kalapuya ilihi. Talon and Brian brought an agriculturalist mentality to the project, but things work a little differently in Kalapuya ilihi, more attuned to stewardship of reciprocal relations with certain plants that grow naturally than careful attention to plants such as corn that would not exist without human partners.

Similarly, Joe's way of thinking matched the experimental ethic of the Three Sisters Project. He had originally called his work Team TEK (Traditional Ecological Knowledge), but never felt comfortable with the title, because it felt too static and authoritative. He changed the name of the project to the Traditional Ecological Inquiry Program to emphasize the goal of engaging with traditional ecological knowledge as learners and thinkers from multiple Indigenous traditions. If it

were simply a knowledge transfer, it would be hard to justify male participation in the harvest of camas, which is traditionally the domain of women. Similarly, exploration of propagation of Indigenous plants through non-traditional methods, such as sprouting camas seeds in refrigerated bags of soil to better understand their sprouting mechanisms, might be out of bounds. Or simply cutting back hazel to get straight basketry materials instead of burning it as tribes would do traditionally, because the current Western fire conditions are out of control. Instead, with encouragement from the Siletz tribal government, he can adapt to current conditions and support intellectual and social engagement with traditional Indigenous ecosystems of the Willamette River Valley. The tribes need the land and the land needs the tribes to be healthy.

The local food source we have collectively paid most attention has been camas. As we learned about the characteristics and traditional uses of camas, we started seeing camas patches everywhere—along the highway, on hikes, in urban spaces. More importantly, we began to understand at a deeper level what camas meant, and what it meant for it to be—or not to be—in various locations. While Joe had known about camas for longer and was culturally connected to it, he too began to appreciate its presence more deeply as a result of his cultural revitalization work. He had not tried to harvest or cook it in a traditional pit oven before, but his goal of engagement with, rather than simple reenactment of, tradition has led him in that direction. His outreach provides a rallying point for tribal ecosystem management, helping to connect Indigenous peoples and individuals to each other and to their own heritage territories, to advance tribal goals, and to build partnership with non-tribal people seeking to support tribal goals, too.

Camas was a staple food and trade item for Indigenous peoples throughout the Pacific Northwest for generations and has remained so for some. It still holds a status as a regional icon even among settlers, in part because Indigenous management methods made for oceans of purple camas flowers on the prairies at the time of Anglo arrivals (Deur and Turner, 2011). Though it is a common wild plant throughout Cascadia, the way Indigenous peoples of the area have tended to it encourages its propagation. First, the digging stick harvest method loosens compact soil in the camas patch, allowing new seeds to take root and keeping the soil looser for the next dig. Second, smaller bulbs that come up with larger bulbs are purposely replanted with better spacing and depth for the next harvest. Third, the largest bulbs, which might be the size of a large plum, might be left alone, composted, or replanted in hopes they produce more around them, and perhaps because they don't cook as easily or taste as sweet as the smaller bulbs, which are not much bigger than a pecan in the shell. Fourth, territorial control over camas patches would ensure that they were harvested sustainably. A family or tribe would never take all the camas from a patch (it sounds foolish to even say that), nor would they harvest the same patch every year, recognizing that camas takes a few years to produce a harvestable bulb. Finally, Kalapuyans and others throughout the region used regular regimes of fire to create expansive oak savannas filled with camas, acorns, berries, and edge habitat to encourage large game. Tribes in the western United States are increasingly pressing for the restoration of these regimes to return the habitat to its previous balance.

While Kalapuya people practiced what has been called “gathering,” it might more accurately be described as resource stewardship, foodscape maintenance, or simply ecosystem maintenance. The parklike appearance of the Willamette Valley noted by settlers was not a product of “untouched” nature, but rather the result of human interaction with it, most notably regular application of fire to the landscape (Norgaard, 2019). Because Anglos forcefully removed most remaining Kalapuya and other inland valley people to the Coast Reservation in the 1850s, Kalapuya ecology was obliterated in their homelands, too. Thus, the ecological trust land where the TEIP was taking place, while formerly maintained for camas, acorn, and big game production, was overcrowded with oaks and invading Douglas fir, and one well-intentioned person even planted the hill with redwood seedlings. An Anglo conservationist view might celebrate the increasing number of trees as the ultimate symbol of natural recovery, but an Indigenous ecological perspective would

view this as a place out of balance and in desperate need of renewal through human intervention. Many commentators have mentioned this distinction between the worldview of Anglo society in which “natural” spaces are those with no humans or evidence of human intervention, and contrasted it with the common Indigenous perspective that humans are an essential component of a balanced ecosystem (Berkes, 2008; Nelson, 2008; Umek/Atleo, 2012). A plant like camas thrives because of its connection with humans who protect it, nurture it, and provide for its prosperity by burning off its competitors, loosening its soil, and replanting its small bulbs with good spacing. The goal of the TEIP is to restore traditional foodscape maintenance to some portion of Kalapuya ilih, restore the oak savanna, and restore Kalapuyans as a keystone culture to the ecosystem.

Of all things, camas shouldn't need to be started in aquaponic contraptions in Kalapuya ilih. Camas belongs there and should thrive easily in the natural environment. Still, camas has been blotted out by the kinds of transformation that attend to settler colonialism: monocropping (in Kalapuya ilih, that means growing a lot of grass for seed, sod, hay, and pasture, and replacing complex forest structures with same-age, single species evergreen stands for lumber, pulp, and Christmas trees), armoring over the terrain with concrete, asphalt, and buildings such that no camas can grow there, restructuring waterways to prevent flooding or to generate electricity (thereby preventing natural nourishment of flooding cycles and of the nutrients salmon return from the ocean), chemical pollution, pesticides that reduce pollinator populations, herbicides, removal of maintenance fires from the landscape, regularly mowed and fertilized grass lawns ... the list goes on, but the ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide against the people who maintain the camas has been the central underlying factor in its decline, like removing bees from an orchard.

Traditional Kalapuya camas production is not proto-agriculture because it's not necessarily moving toward agriculture in some linear narrative of development. It is foodscape maintenance, and it carries a whole worldview with it. In this worldview, Kalapuya storyteller Esther Stutzman has said that it is actually forbidden for Kalapuya people to plant camas from seeds. This provides an interesting comparison for our original goals, which were in part to think about what tradition means in a world that has changed so dramatically. What are the important parts of tradition to hold onto and what elements can be beneficially changed to support a more important element? That is to say, would it be worth losing camas altogether to protect a traditional prohibition against planting by seed?

Nonetheless, Stutzman says with a wink, it's fine if other people plant camas and Kalapuya people can benefit from that. David Lewis, a Kalapuyan scholar enrolled at Grand Ronde who has spent years immersed in the archives and oral histories of Western Oregon and was at one point the manager of the tribe's Cultural Resources Department, says he has never heard that Kalapuyans aren't supposed to use seeds to plant camas. As with virtually every tribe, traditions and what to do with them are contested. In this context, how should we proceed?

Bad farmers

In the spirit of Roxane Gay's (2014) *Bad Feminist* and Deborah Miranda's (2013) *Bad Indians*, we are “bad farmers.” Well, Brian confesses to being a bad farmer without the quotation marks. But “bad farmers” is intended to suggest that we strive toward some ideals that we don't quite meet, and we reject some ideals that the term farming implies. That is to say, are not (yet!) self-sufficient food producers, and we are wary of the racialized frame of “farming” that excludes and disparages Indigenous practices of ecosystem management, especially in the Pacific Northwest but even among Indigenous peoples who thrived with Three Sisters agriculture. Arguments about where to draw the line between “true” agriculture and “mere” stewardship and similar lines of thinking have been used to justify taking land from Native people historically and into the present, with devastating consequences (Deur and Turner, 2011). “Bad farmers,” then, is intended to claim space for

a wide range of established Indigenous practices and to claim space for beginners. The noun of the phrase is only modified by the adjective, not negated. We aim to highlight the Anglo cultural restrictions around the term that characterize it through the patriarchal nuclear family unit on individually owned plots of land, the assimilationist version of farming that the US imposed on Southeastern tribes and Western Oregon tribes alike and then used as justification for dispossession when tribes “failed” at the assimilationist version of it. We are not trying to achieve cultural purity so much as connection, rebuilding, and reconsideration of the terms of engagement. We are living Indians. We are actively breaking some tribal protocols even as we embrace others. We are working with tribal and non-tribal people. We are using the internet to look for some answers. We aren’t sure what we’re doing half the time until after we’ve done it. But we are trying to make a better life for ourselves, our peoples, and for all the people around us through art, education, experimentation, and collaboration.

The unknown outcome of the experimentation has been one of the most engaging elements of the project, and this framing allowed us to accept the success or failure of the crops on equal terms. We learned that growing corn, beans, and squash artificially didn’t work well. Why grow corn with electric light? Why not skip the middle man and just let them grow with the power of the sun as they always have? Plants are already solar powered. And while the soil in Kalapuya ilih typically needs some amendments to support the Three Sisters, corn has always emerged from the nourishment of the earth, sun, open air, and water. They already provide the perfect system for producing corn. While our efforts produced mostly pencil-thin stalks and deer fodder, our good friend and neighbor from the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, Kirby Brown, produced great success with corn starts we gave him for his more conventional garden. Success through relational collaboration! The focus of the performance art project was the process of relational inquiry rather than just a vision of one individual, and it conveyed some answers we had started out looking for about Indigeneity, community, place, and plants. The Three Sisters art project didn’t work well for food production because it wasn’t the culturally embedded, place-based, soil-and-sun practices that sustain Three Sisters agriculture. Similarly, no effort is wasted in the TEIP, because even when we accidentally burn a batch of camas to smithereens in the camas pit as we did in June 2021, we learn what happens when the fire gets too hot for cooking.

Like our ancestors, we learn by doing together, which makes us contemplate the kinds of things our ancestors had to do as they moved, by force or by choice, in the past. Talking to each other and learning from strangers got our ancestors through. Inquiry and experimentation got them through. Ingenuity got them through. Like them, we are learning, having some successes, making some guesses, and making mistakes. Thankfully for us, our mistakes are not life or death, as theirs could be. We can ask others, we can ask Saint Google for guidance, but even then, we’re sure to make mistakes. Critically, asking other people brings us closer to each other, closer to our food, closer to our cultural heritage, and closer to the Indigenous people wherever we travel, actively producing relationality. As Greg Cajete (2000) wrote, sometimes “remembering to remember” is the most important thing, and good things will flow from that.

People from Talon and Brian’s Indigenous homelands east of the Mississippi were incredible farmers in the old days, with legendary fields of crops that stretched for miles on end, providing 90% of the caloric intake for thousands of people in a village (Perdue, 1998). Talon and Brian cannot match them. Not yet anyway. We’re not ruling it out, but we’re remembering the lessons of humility, respect for knowledge, admiration for our ancestors, respect for the gifts of the sun, earth, and rain that have been given to us, and gratitude to those who developed these crops. After all, corn was once new to our ancestors, brought by an Unknown Woman who showed them how to care for it (Seyler, 2014). We know our ancestors had to learn to become the self-sufficient farmers that they were. We know that they understood corn’s origins to be miraculous and we wonder about that process of its arrival, how the story was passed from one people to another as corn agriculture spread.

Scholarly analysis suggests that corn was developed in central Mexico ten thousand years ago from teosinte, the grassy ancestor of modern corn (Staller, et al., 2006). We imagine a farmer at that time, generations ago, tending to teosinte, and if plant geneticists are correct (Iltis, 2006), finding a “Maizoid Eve,” or a miraculous cob, covered with multiple rows of soft kernels, unlike the single or alternating rows of hard seeds that teosinte produces normally. Even in its earliest variant, it would surely have felt miraculous. How could the farmer not wonder at the origin of such a gift, or fall to their knees in gratitude? We imagine the farmers who had never had corn but had it brought to them by a mysterious woman; even for them, the feeling must have been miraculous when it arrived and when people saw how it could feed them so abundantly. And the fact that it only grows with human attention surely shaped people’s experience of it. This is one reason why so much religion is based on corn in places where it exists. It is a divine gift, but one that needs tender human care. We came to understand this more fully through the Three Sisters Project, even if we never become “good farmers” ourselves.

Joe similarly cherishes the gifts of camas, acorns, and other culturally significant plants of the Pacific Northwest and the connections to others he makes through them. He investigates the question of how to restore or maintain those cultural relationships to plants with an open mind about the best path forward, carrying a renewed spirit of experimentation and consideration of our relation to tradition that the Three Sisters Project helped cultivate within him. Informed by tradition, but motivated by engagement, knowledge sharing, knowledge production, and knowledge retention alike, the youth and adults in TEIP have been investigating how they can support propagation of camas and other culturally significant plants in Kalapuya ilih. This is our way forward together, and it is a project in process.

This article is merely the written residue of the real project, which is always in motion. The real project is the cold, sunny March morning in 2019, when five Native youth, a couple of Native oldies like Brian and Joe, and a handful of non-Indian adults meet at the West Eugene Wetlands education center to examine the seeds they had refrigerated in the fall and prepare to replant them. The real project is a late spring morning in 2019, when Kalapuya elder Don Day of the Grand Ronde tribes demonstrates how to split planks from cedar logs in a traditional way with wooden mallets and antler wedges, the way tribal ancestors used to make plank houses in days gone by. The real project is summer solstice in 2020, when Siletz tribal member Jessica Douglas led the TEIP’s first camas pit roast at the conservation trust land, based on archival instructions from her ancestor, Hoxie Simmons. The real project is the community we build when we work together on these projects of Indigenous food sovereignty and place. The real project is planting Indigenous companions wherever we are, and being good companions, too.

The (fictitious) model of the solo genius artist or scholar or farmer toiling alone should have gone out with the manual typewriter and the Allotment Act. Propagate companionship, nurture and empower Indigenous community, steward the foodscape. Think about the plants you eat in relation to the place you live and in relation to historical processes you’re a part of. Participate, even if you’re a bad farmer, even if you just have a single food plant in your window. Get kids to participate so we are passing it down. Don’t let it get stuck in the walls of the classroom or the lab, and consider the good things that can come from trying something new. In the physical performance of these actions, you might find your relationship to food changing. You might find your relationship to place changing. You might find your relationship to tribal culture changing. You might find your relationship to your ancestors changing. You might become a better relative. You might surround yourself with good relatives.

Highlights

- Uses an environmental humanities (performance art) approach to Indigenous food sovereignty projects

- Provides models for Indigenous and non-Indigenous engagement beyond territorial acknowledgments
- Seeks to capture important modes of Indigenous mobility in contemporary life
- Critiques US settler valorization of “homesteading”
- Frames “companion planting” as an Indigenous aesthetic with reach beyond plants alone

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Notes

1. “A watershed council is a community-based, voluntary, non-regulatory group that meets regularly in their local communities to assess conditions in a given watershed (usually a river or creek and the lands that drain into them) and to conduct projects to restore or enhance the waters and lands for fish and native plants in their areas. Oregon is one of the few states to have this community-based model—supported by the state and recognized by local governments—to focus on restoring land and water from “ridgetop to ridgetop.” Network of Oregon Watersheds, “About Watershed Councils.”

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